

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 SEPTEMBER 2012

**Briefing on Consumer Empowerment Partnership Pilot in
Oxfordshire April 2012 - March 2013**

Report by Director of Social and Community Services

Background

1. This is a pilot project, funded by Citizens Advice (Cit A), in which Oxfordshire Trading Standards is a partner organisation. The funding has been provided to Oxford Citizens Advice Bureau.
2. In April 2012, Citizens Advice took on the government funded role of providing the National Consumer Advice Service (NCAS). Consumers are able to contact the service for self- help advice on resolving consumer/trader disputes. Potential criminal activity relating to traders is referred to Trading Standards Services by the NCAS.
3. In April 2013, Citizens Advice takes over the government funded role of consumer advocacy, education and empowerment from the Office of Fair Trading and Consumer Focus.
4. Cit A intends that local Consumer Empowerment Partnerships (CEPs) *"provide local leadership in consumer protection and empowerment, integrating information, advice, education and advocacy...networks of advice givers and campaigners working together to ensure that people can get advice and information, can access education programmes, can report and hear about scams, rogue traders and local issues and can participate in activities to tackle these issues"* (Citizens Advice External Briefing on Consumer empowerment Partnerships).
5. The Oxfordshire pilot is one of 6 large scale projects. A summary of its aims is:
 1. To create an effective partnership of all local advice and support organisations to:
 - a. Pool evidence and influence policy makes
 - b. Advocate for and represent consumers' interests locally
 - c. Ensure effective delivery of consumer education programmes
 - d. Support the providers of consumer advice and support services
 2. Campaign to raise consumer awareness of specific, locally relevant consumer problems and to educate consumers to protect themselves

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3. Encourage and facilitate information sharing between advice agencies and Trading Standards to ensure the effective enforcement of consumer protection legislation
6. To this end an initial forum was held on 5 July at Graham Hill House, to which all the currently known local providers of consumer advice and support were invited.
7. An information sharing protocol between local Citizens Advice Bureaux and Trading Standards is being formulated. Once agreed and implemented it will allow a local Citizens Advice Bureau to pass on to Trading Standards information it receives from its clients which show incidences or patterns of consumer harm. It will address issues of data protection in sharing such information and will reassure staff and volunteers in the bureaux that their clients' confidentiality and interests will be protected when this intelligence is shared.
8. Two publicity/education campaigns will be conducted in the second half of the financial year, focussing on issues which the partners agree form the most serious local consumer harm.

Conclusion

9. A representative of the CEP from one of the local Citizens Advice Bureaux has been asked to attend the September Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting to provide an overview of the project and answer questions on it.

John Jackson
Director of Social and Community Services

Background papers: none

Contact Officer: Richard Webb
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